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Destabilizing Myths of the American South: Allison Janae Hamilton's Haints and Landscapes

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Destabilizing Myths of the American South: Allison Janae Hamilton's Haints and Landscapes

by

Rachel Patricia Urbano

Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2020

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated in memoriam to my grandparents, Mario and Remie Urbano, who made it possible for me to be who I am today. Thank you, Lolo and Lola, for everything.

Acknowledgements

This thesis was only possible with the support of a community of professors, mentors, friends, and family. First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Ann Reynolds, for her guidance, wisdom, encouragement, and patience over the past two years. Thank you for reminding me that we do what we can, only with what we have, and that is enough. And, for teaching me that the most important writing we can do is ultimately for ourselves. I also want to thank my second reader, Eddie Chambers, for his warm encouragement, support, and direction on my thesis. I am grateful to my other committee members George Flaherty, John Clarke, and Nicole Awai for their feedback that helped shape this project. I thank my mentors Lisa DeBoer and Judy Larson for being the first to encourage me to pursue art history, and for their continued support over the years. Thank you to my dear friends and art history colleagues: Erin, Crystal, Maggie, Claire, Amanda, and Ingrid. I feel so fortunate to know such brilliant and kind women. To Kelsey, Hannah, Libby, and the Tropicana and Carp House women: thank you for your love, humor, and for gently reminding me of life outside of grad school. Words cannot fully express my gratitude to my parents, Rod and Jenny, and my siblings, Jacob and Hannah, for all of the ways you support me. Last but not least, I am grateful to Allison for her generosity and for making space for me to write about her work. I also extend my thanks to Al's studio manager Laeticia for graciously working with me and being so accommodating with all of my various requests and questions.

Abstract

Destabilizing Myths of the American South: Allison Janae Hamilton's Haints and Landscapes

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2020

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In this thesis, I examine the notion of myth in the work of Allison Janae Hamilton (b. 1984) who in the last several years has emerged onto the American art scene with great success. I argue that selections from her exhibition, *Pitch*, and her photographic series, *Sweet milk in the badlands*, facilitate a discussion on structures of myth and how they operate in Hamilton's work overall. I contend that the simultaneous presence of dualities, such as familiarity and unfamiliarity, in Hamilton's work complicates notions of the South as fixed and static. In addition, I go beyond identifying and explicating structures of myth in Hamilton's work in order to address the problems of metaphor that surface when myth is destabilized. Throughout this thesis I also undertake a speculative exercise in thinking through the unique challenges of writing about a young, early career artist who is emerging into the art world in a temporal moment in which identity and place are especially charged. I use examples from Hamilton's practice in the effort to grapple with the more general

question of how to write about and theorize the work of a young artist who is still developing her voice and her practice.

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Introduction

The main character in Allison Janae Hamilton's photographs, videos, sculptures, and installations is the landscape itself. Place is the starting point of Hamilton's artistic process. Born in Kentucky in 1984 and raised in Florida, the landscapes of the American South are foundational to her work. In middle school, she learned darkroom techniques and began using photography to document life and labor on her family's farm in the rural flatlands of western Tennessee. As one of the younger members of her extended family, she was often exempt from farm labor. She describes turning to photography as a way to document and indirectly participate in the rituals of labor on her family's farm until she was old enough to safely participate.[1]

Eventually, Hamilton studied fashion design and earned a B.S. degree at Florida State University in Tallahassee (2006). After completing her undergraduate studies, she moved to New York City and began working on various fashion-related projects including costume design for theatre productions.[2] In addition to her artistic pursuits, Hamilton is trained as a researcher and scholar and has earned a M.A. degree in American Studies from Columbia University (2010), a Ph.D. degree in American Studies from New York University (2015), and most recently, an M.F.A. degree from Columbia University (2017). Hamilton transitioned from working in fashion to full-time art making after being accepted to the Whitney Independent Study Program in 2014, and she has emerged onto the

[1] "Interview with Allison Janae Hamilton," telephone interview by author, February 2020).
[2] Ibid.

American contemporary art scene in the last two years as a "breakout talent" to watch.[3] Hamilton has achieved an impressive amount of success in her career thus far, and she has already garnered awards, exhibitions, residencies, and gallery representation in just three short years since receiving her M.F.A.[4]

Now as a professional artist, Hamilton creates the majority of her photo and video works in northern Florida and Tennessee near places that are significant to her family, and although she is based in New York City, Hamilton maintains an intimate connection with the landscapes of the South. She often returns to her home region of Northern Florida to visit family and produce work directly in the landscapes that she is familiar with. In an essay written for *Art21 Magazine*, Hamilton narrated the cycles of labor that marked her childhood in the South:

> In Tennessee, the family farm was centered on cotton and soybean crops. My great-grandparents, my grandmother and her nine siblings, and my mother and countless cousins called this land their home. My aunts made muscadine wine and fermented persimmons into beer. They raised guinea hens, hogs, catfish, and hunting hounds. My great-grandmother, for whom I was named, was a known markswoman; she passed on her skill of how to handle a rifle, by teaching her daughters. When I was a child, my mother and I would make the trek from Florida to Tennessee a few times each year, to help with the planting and harvest seasons. We'd snap beans in the spring and silk corn in the summer. Around Thanksgiving, cotton lined the sides of every road in town like snow, as it fell off the trucks heading for processing. In Florida, we'd prepare for hurricanes during the rainy season, tend to backyard citrus, and were endlessly watchful of alligators in neighborhood canals. These

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3 Artsy Editors, "The 15 Breakout Artists of 2018," Artsy, April 30, 2018, https://www.artsy.net/series/artsy-vanguard/artsy-editors-breakout-talents.

4 Allison Janae Hamilton, "Curriculum Vitae," Artist's Website, accessed November 15, 2018, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/528e66a2e4b0a636d24ccd51/t/5e178d7ece3f013fa2121150/1578601854662/AllisonJanaeHamilton_CV.pdf.; "Allison Janae Hamilton: Artist Profile," Marianne Boesky Gallery, May 27, 2020, https://www.marianneboeskygallery.com/artists/allison-janae-hamilton/#biography.

> everyday confluences of life, labor, and land were the basis of my experience of the world.[5]

Hamilton accumulated an intimate knowledge of the landscapes she grew up in through these cycles of labor, but she also references oral history practices that had an equal influence on her personal experience of the South. She notes that, "I learned how natural materials hold a tangible history of lineage, labor, and land that communities pass down to succeeding generations through shared stories and mythologies."[6] Viewers of her recent work may identify or observe elements that are intentionally mysterious or fantastical. These effects reference sources that are intangible, but which live on across generations through various types of oral history practices, mostly shared informally during family gatherings and everyday interactions among Hamilton and her relatives.

Hamilton draws from a collective repository of mythologies, embodied knowledge, and oral histories that have been passed down to her through various channels. The mythologies that materialize in Hamilton's work are informed by an amalgamation of her own personal memories, conversations with family members, southern folklore, and family myths that take the form of superstitions and homeopathic remedies for illness. These are intangible sources of knowledge and history that must be traced through a theory of "experiential knowledge" as put forth by LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, which I will demonstrate later in this thesis.[7] Hamilton also calls upon a constellation of sources on

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5 Allison Janae Hamilton, "A Tangible History of the American South," Art21 Magazine, http://magazine.art21.org/2019/05/09/tangible-and-fantastic/#.XkO_ThNKiRu.
6 Ibid.
7 LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, ""I Had a Praying Grandmother": Religion, Prophetic Witness, and Black Women's Herstories," in *New Perspectives on the Black Intellectual Tradition*, edited by Blain Keisha N.,

African American history, which include critical texts by African American authors, Blues music, hymns, and a syncretism of Christian and Afro-Caribbean religions such as Hoodoo, Santería, and Candomblé.

According to Hamilton herself, and those who have written about her practice, the South is both a physical and conceptual space from which she creates almost all of her work.[8] Hamilton deploys a set of sources from her personal experiences and identity to explore and/or transform the historical and aesthetic concept of "Americana" as it exists in the context of the rural American South.[9] In this thesis project, I constellate the majority of my analysis around the work that Hamilton included in her first solo museum exhibition *Pitch*, which was on display at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) from March 25th, 2018 to March 17th, 2019. For this exhibition, Hamilton created new work, most notably an installation of actual pine logs that created an immersive forest environment (figure 1) and also featured a selection of her earlier sculpture, video, and photography works that were made between 2015-2018 (figures 1-12). While *Pitch* was not a traditional survey exhibition, the work selected for the exhibition is representative of her practice and overarching interests in this early period of her career. In addition to studying the *Pitch* exhibition as a whole, I also consider works from her photographic series *Sweet milk in the badlands* (figures 13-16), selections of which were included in *Pitch*.

Cameron Christopher, and Farmer Ashley D., 115-30. EVANSTON, ILLINOIS: Northwestern University Press, 2018. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv7tq4rv.11.

[8] Hamilton, "Biography," Artist's Website, accessed November 8, 2018, http://www.allisonjanaehamilton.com/biography.

[9] Ibid.

My interest in Hamilton's practice began when I wrote a paper on her work for a graduate seminar on contemporary art in 2018. I decided to revisit her work for this thesis project because even a year later I continued to be intrigued by her work, but I felt that I could not quite grasp what made it operate and what engendered my attraction to it. As a starting point, I wanted to dig deeper into the relationship between the ideas of "haunting and beauty" and other conceptual dualities that I observed in her work.[10] What I experienced with Hamilton's work was an allure and attraction that I could not quite pinpoint, but which I intuitively assumed was powerful in its mechanisms. As my observations and analysis evolved, I realized that I could use Hamilton's work to ask more specific questions about the power of myth and about the American South as a discursive space. Much of what undergirds my discussion of myth and the South in this thesis is a speculative exercise in thinking through the difficulties that may arise when writing about a young, early career, contemporary artist who is emerging into the art world in a temporal moment in which identity and place are especially charged and contested. I use Hamilton's career as a means to grapple with the more general question of how to write about and theorize the work of a young artist who is still developing her voice and her practice.

By examining how dualities operate in *Sweet milk in the badlands* and *Pitch*, I track the ways in which Hamilton destabilizes the South as something that might be assumed to be fixed or homogenous, but which is largely dependent on a subject's position in relation to it. Both the South as a place and southern-ness as an identity are not rigid or definitive

[10] Hamilton, "A Tangible History of the American South." Hamilton uses various forms of the terms "haunting and beauty" to describe her own work.

concepts. As Edward Ayers argues, the South and the identities and stories that flow out of this region are in a state of "constant movement, struggle, and negotiation."[11] I propose that selections from *Pitch* and *Sweet milk in the badlands* facilitate a discussion on how the structure and operation of myth is constituted through repetition and reinscription in various visual or verbal forms, whether it is through southern folklore, visual representations of haints, or other natural materials with southern resonances. I investigate how Hamilton's work relies upon myths of the South that have become naturalized through consumption, use, and repetition.

In Hamilton's work there are objects, creatures, sounds, and images that may first appear as if they are solely from what we might regard the natural world, but upon closer examination, they reveal themselves to be a hybrid of the real and fantastic. Hamilton encourages viewers to sit in the uncomfortable space between what is known and familiar, and what is unknown or unfamiliar. I suggest that the simultaneous presence of dualities, such as "haunting and beauty" (Hamilton's terms) or familiarity and unfamiliarity, in these works undercuts fixed notions of the South. In Hamilton's work, the function of myth is revealed as a discursive structure that emerges through cultural forms that were born within the specific context of the American South, in a place of "simultaneous haunting and beauty."[12]

[11] Edward Ayers, "What We Talk about When We Talk about the South," in *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions*, 81.
[12] Hamilton, "A Tangible History of the American South."

African American Art of the South: The Souls Grown Deep Foundation and Recent Exhibitions

The positive reception of Hamilton's work, especially over the past two years, and her integration into the New York City art scene as a young, black artist, raises several questions about the general surge in interest in art of the American South. This trend has taken hold in various American museums and the art market over the last several decades. While my observations of this phenomenon are not the centerpiece of this thesis project, it is necessary to provide a preliminary context for Hamilton's work in this particular moment in her young career. The purpose of this section is to offer a tentative framework for understanding Hamilton's work, considering recent trends in the art world, and to survey the existing literature that is relevant to my analysis. The increase in interest in art of the American South over the last several decades in the United States could be an expansive project in and of itself, but I do not attempt to produce a full historical survey here. Two primary examples that are relevant to Hamilton's work are the growing recognition of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation's collection and the exhibition *Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art* (2016-2017) co-organized by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University and the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky.

The Souls Grown Deep Foundation was founded in 2010 by William "Bill" S. Arnett, a white art collector from Columbus, Georgia who began collecting art in the 1980s by African American artists residing in the southeastern United States in poor, rural communities.[13] The majority of the works in the Souls Grown Deep Foundation collection

[13] George Edgers, "Bill Arnett Won't Shut Up. His Stunning African American Art Collection Is Why.," The Washington Post, March 9, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/lifestyle/bill-arnett-

were made in the second half of the twentieth century.[14] According to Arnett, many of the artists that he "discovered" did not necessarily call themselves artists.[15] Over the years, Arnett amassed an impressively large collection that is now housed in Atlanta where the foundation is based. During his decades-long passion searching for and collecting artwork in the South, Arnett has become a controversial figure in the art world, and many question the ethics of his collecting practices.[16] The works in the Foundation's collection were created by artists that are often assigned varying terms such as "self-taught," "vernacular," "outsider," "primitive," "visionary," or "folk." Over two-thirds of the artists represented in the collection are women. Since its establishment, the Foundation has carried out an extensive program to donate a large portion of the works in the collection to prominent American and international museums.[17]

Exhibitions of works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation's collection that were gifted to high-profile museums have cropped up in the last decade, and I argue that they coincide with a movement to diversify museums at the levels of administration, exhibitions, collections, education, and more. These powerful, often hegemonic,

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african-american-art-collection/); Souls Grown Deep Foundation, "About the Foundation," accessed February 10, 2020, https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/foundation). In the 1980s, art historian William S. Harnett began collecting contemporary African American art of the South, and he also compiled an archive of documentary materials from these "largely undiscovered" artists. Harnett's private collection formed the basis for what would become the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. The foundation "derives its name from a 1921 poem by Langston Hughes (1902-67) titled "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," the last line of which reads 'My soul has grown deep like the rivers.'" The foundation's collection was first displayed in several exhibitions on black art of the American South in the early 2000s and exhibitions highlight these works continue to be organized into the present. A record of exhibitions that have included works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation is provided on the foundation's website.

[14] Souls Grown Deep Foundation, "About the Foundation."

[15] Edgers, "Bill Arnett Won't Shut Up. His Stunning African American Art Collection Is Why."

[16] Ibid.

[17] Souls Grown Deep Foundation, "About the Foundation."

institutions have begun to respond to public pressure and demands to address the inequities in their organizations. Scholars and art critics have covered this increasingly urgent topic extensively, especially over the last two years.[18] A selection of headlines from articles published by *Hyperallergic* this summer read: "Open Letter Criticizes Getty for Racial Bias and Insensitivity," "Former Staffers and Board Members Denounce Racism at Smithsonian National Museum of African Art," and " Former SFMOMA Staffers Demand "Radical Reexamination" of Board of Trustees."[19] Movements such as Decolonize This Place have gone even further to demand anti-capitalist structural change in museums, primarily focusing their efforts on decolonizing cultural institutions in New York City.[20]

The following exhibitions that were hosted by prominent American museums are just a selection of the more than twenty exhibitions in the last two decades that have featured art from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation collection.[21] This steady increase of

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[18] Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011); Maurice Berger, "Are Art Museums Racist?" *Art in America* (1939) 78, no. 9 (September 1, 1990): 68–; Aruna D'Souza, Parker Bright, and Pastiche Lumumba, *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2018). The texts listed here explore the history of racism and inequity in American museums. In addition, a keyword search on the online art publication *Hyperallergic's* website reveals a plethora of articles that provide coverage on the movement for greater for diversity and inclusion in American museums (and internationally), as well as the challenges that activists continue to face as they make demands for change. For more, see: https://hyperallergic.com/?s=diversity.

[19] Valentina Di Liscia, "Former Staffers and Board Members Denounce Racism at Smithsonian National Museum of African Art," Hyperallergic, July 16, 2020, https://hyperallergic.com/577140/smithsonian-national-museum-of-african-art-culture-of-racism/; Sam Lefebvre, "Former SFMOMA Staffers Demand "Radical Reexamination" of Board of Trustees," Hyperallergic, July 16, 2020, https://hyperallergic.com/577208/xsfmoma-open-letter-board-of-trustees/; Matt Stromberg, "Open Letter Criticizes Getty for Racial Bias and Insensitivity," Hyperallergic, July 31, 2020, https://hyperallergic.com/577530/open-letter-criticizes-getty-for-racial-bias-and-insensitivity/.

[20] Decolonize This Place, "After Kanders, Decolonization Is the Way Forward," Hyperallergic, January 22, 2020, https://hyperallergic.com/511683/decolonize-this-place-after-kanders/); Decolonize This Place, "FAXXX," DTP, https://decolonizethisplace.org/faxxx-1.

[21] Souls Grown Deep Foundation, "Exhibitions," accessed February 10, 2020, https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/exhibitions.

interest in African American art of the South is undoubtedly due in part to the Souls Grown Deep Foundation's outreach initiatives and gifting program. The exhibitions that I have selected to represent are those that were organized with the primary intent to celebrate the donation of works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation to their permanent collections. The curatorial strategy for these types of exhibitions is to commemorate a recent acquisition or donation, often without a real critical evaluation of the works in question. The Metropolitan Museum of Art organized an exhibition in 2018 titled *History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift* (May 22nd – Sep 23rd, 2018) comprised of fifty-seven artworks that were gifted to the museum from the Foundation. In the exhibition catalogue, *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South,* curators organized artworks into three broad categories: Self-Taught and Modern, Quilt/Art, and The Old Country.[22] Another exhibition of Souls Grown Deep works, *Revelations: Art from the African American South* (June 3rd, 2017 – April 1st, 2018), was displayed at the de Young and organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.[23] In addition, the Philadelphia Museum of Art hosted an exhibition titled *Souls Grown Deep: Artists of the African American South* (June 8th – September 2nd, 2019).[24] Most recently, the Toledo Museum of Art organized the exhibition *Trip to the Mountaintop: Recent Acquisitions from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation* (April 4th, 2020 – July 5th, 2020).

[22] Cheryl Finley et al., *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018).
[23] Timothy Anglin Burgard, *Revelations: Art from the African American South* (Munich: DelMonico Books, Prestel, 2017).
[24] Souls Grown Deep Foundation, "Exhibitions."

While the purpose behind these exhibitions may be well-intentioned, the unintended outcome of these celebratory efforts (that merely commemorate a donation and flatter the donor) is an arguable undervaluation of the artwork and artists that are represented. The installation and catalogue of each exhibition may be visually stunning, but the content or thesis of a celebratory-type exhibition is hard to decipher with such a mix of media, themes, and styles represented together without critical attention to the nuanced differences between each of the artists. The artwork in these exhibitions are lumped together under broad categories such as "African American art of the South," which is not inaccurate, but lacks precision. It also begs the questions of *which* South, for *whom*?[25] What defines these works as southern besides the obvious fact that these artists are from the South? What must also be explored is: how these donated works are being interpreted by each institution in catalogues and wall labels; how the exhibitions are developed and marketed to audiences; how do various audiences view and interpret these works for themselves; and how are these works categorized within (or outside of) the canon of American art and art history at large.

From one perspective, it is promising that prominent American museums are willing to accept donations of artwork like that of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, and celebrate the addition of these works by black artists to their permanent collections. There is also the question of whether the donation agreement stipulations require the recipient museum to organize an exhibition of the work as a recognition of the gift, which is not

[25] There is also the critical question of location: what area constitutes the South geographically and who gets to decide this?

uncommon. Regardless of the exact mandates for or origins of these exhibitions, the opportunity is being embraced by institutions and delivered to patrons and the public. Often, to qualify the newfound importance of these artists, curators and art historians situate them in relation to artists that are already canonized in art history, most of whom are white; or in a similar fashion, the visual language of these African American artists (who are from a particular class and rural background) is qualified by its formal associations with American modernism.[26]

Several other museums have displayed selected works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation's collection to include in group exhibitions that explore art of the American South, but these exhibitions are organized around a particular issue or theme, rather than merely acknowledging a generous donation, and they therefore offer more space for a critical dialogue on African American artists from the South (even if these exhibitions are also not without their own problematics). Two recent examples of these more nuanced exhibitions are *We Will Walk – Art and Resistance in the American South* organized by the Turner Contemporary in Margate, England (February 7th – September 6th, 2020), and *Cosmologies from the Tree of Life: Art from the African American South* organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia.[27] Not all of these exhibitions are at prominent, large institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and therefore they are arguably reaching smaller audiences than the celebratory exhibitions at major museums.

[26] The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift," https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/exhibition/history-refused-die-highlights-souls-grown-deep-foundation-gift).

[27] Souls Grown Deep Foundation, "Exhibitions."

Besides an impulse to "diversify" a permanent collection, there are other forces at work that are driving the contemporary interest in African American artists from this region—particularly artists from rural communities, as mentioned above, that created their work apart from the mainstream art establishment. It would be a separate project in itself to track this noticeable and growing "trend," "movement," or phase of interest—a singular term cannot yet be assigned to it in a definitive manner, and only time will determine more of its character.

I investigate this interest in African American art of the South in order to place Hamilton's practice among a set of close relations, to account for the swift success of her career thus far, and to examine, at least in part, her position within the U.S. art scene. With this surge in interest in artwork by African American artists from the South, more effort should be made to resist essentializing this art (and the South) according to the collection of one entity, that of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. There is a risk of creating too strong of an association between the South and these "vernacular" arts, which is too reductive a categorization to do justice to the variety and difference among arts of the South. This could result in a fetishized version of "black southern art" being made to stand in for the whole of the South, which is indeed an inaccurate assumption. Even while pressure is being put on museums to address the power structures that uphold them as institutions, it is clear from the examples above that more can be done to present these works by African American artists in exhibitions that are more precise in their organization and critical in their assessment. While the Souls Grown Deep Foundation collection and William S. Arnett should be acknowledged for his unique collecting strategy of art from

rural communities in the South, one collection should not universally define what southern art looks like. On one hand, it is promising to see prominent museums accepting donations and exhibiting artwork that has been previously marginalized outside of the canon of Western art history. On the other hand, there could also be the outcome of institutions displaying these in-kind gifts as a means of virtue signaling to their patrons and the public that they are an inclusive and progressive institution without necessarily making real, concrete steps to remedy inequities in their organizations.

A curatorial approach that proved to be more nuanced in its consideration of the South in contemporary art was the exhibition *Southern Accent*: *Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art* co-organized, as mentioned earlier, by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, and the Speed Museum of Art in Louisville, Kentucky (2016-2017). The goal of the co-curators Miranda Lash and Trevor Schoonmaker was to curate an exhibition and catalogue that would question and complicate conceptions of the South and its fraught history.[28] In addition to their own essay contributions, Lash and Schoonmaker commissioned a group of artists, art historians, curators, food critics, musicians, poets, and other cultural figures to produce short essays in response to the exhibition, and to share their thoughts on what constitutes the South from their perspective. The exhibition included work by "folk" artists, but it also incorporated pieces from a variety of other artists working in and outside the region, and whose work

[28] Sarah Schroth and Ghislain D'Humières, "Director's Foreword," in *Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

invoked the South through different media and styles. Lash rightfully identifies the complexity of the South as a geographical region and conceptual place:

> If we consider southern identity as a construct that is performative rather than fixed and innate, it makes sense to adopt scholar Scott Romine's view that the South is "a noun that behaves like a verb." The meaning of the South is continually acted and reenacted; the South evolves with each generation, each popular portrayal, and each wave of immigrants who are shaped by (and have an active role in shaping) it. [...] Memory, nostalgia, fantasy, desire, and fear all exert a powerful influence on how the South is spoken about and portrayed—the idea of the South is a battleground over which much blood and ink have been spilled. Our goal is not to present a singular vision of an authentic or cohesive South; even if a "true" South does not actually exist, individuals still behave in accordance with how they perceive the South.[29]

Most importantly, the curators of the exhibition were careful not to promote the idea that the South can be easily defined or classified, which was especially clear in the exhibition catalogue. For them, this catalogue serves as merely one entry point to begin exploring the visual language and culture of the South in recent contemporary art, and it is also an investigation into "the slipperiness of what 'the South' is and means" as Lash describes.[30] Beyond merely documenting the artworks displayed in the exhibition, the catalogue includes an extensive archive of materials relating to the culture of the South, which was compiled by the exhibition curators and organizers. This archive includes creative essays by a selection of scholars, artists, and critics; a music library; a chronology of southern art and scholarship; and a reading list.

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[29] Miranda Lash, "What do we envision when we talk about the South?" in Miranda Lash and Trevor Schoonmaker, *Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 21.
[30] Ibid, 19.

While the scope of my project cannot accommodate a whole survey of visual representations of the South in recent contemporary art, the *Southern Accent* curatorial project has been a useful guide as I have constellated and gathered visual and textual sources to illuminate Hamilton's work and its relationship with the South. It remains to be seen whether the recent and growing interest in art of the American South will continue to increase, or if it will prove to be a momentary phenomenon that fades or transforms along with the ebbs and flows of the art market and cultural interest.

Lastly, I highlight two sources that have been essential to my examination of Hamilton's source material as it relates to the form and content of myth, which I discuss in the following sections of this thesis. I rely heavily upon an essay written by Hamilton herself titled "A Tangible History of the American South," which was published by *Art21 Magazine* in the "Invisible Landscapes" issue (May 2019). In this text, Hamilton describes the landscapes in the South that are familiar and important to her and her family. I approach this publication as an autobiographical essay and as another iteration of an artist's statement. Hamilton highlights a wide array of themes across her work, which are rooted in her more general interest in place and landscape. This essay also serves as an unofficial record of the sources and materials that inform her creative process. I take a critical approach to this essay in order to decipher and complicate how Hamilton uses certain keywords to describe her work (such as "fantasy," "myth," and "ritual"), versus how they are actually operating and materializing in the work. Hamilton also describes how various forms of knowledge in her family have been passed down to her through labor, oral history, and human-land relationships. Another short essay on Hamilton was published in the

exhibition catalogue for *Pitch* and was written by co-curators Susan Cross and Larry Ossei-Mensah for MASS MoCA. That particular essay touches on the themes of landscape and memory, labor, and the duality of myth and fiction.

Chapter 1: The Operation of Myth

The South in Motion: Conceptualizing the South as a Place and Space

What might it look like to think about the South not only as a *place*, but also as a *space*? In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), the multi-disciplinary scholar Michel de Certeau differentiates between the concepts of place and space, arguing that a place is an "instantaneous configuration of positions," which suggest stability or stasis.[31] Conversely, de Certeau defines space as an "ensemble of movements" which implies spatial depth and energy. A space, as defined by de Certeau, is in a constant state of flux, change, and movement.

> A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. On this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken…[32]

I invoke de Certeau here in order to delve deeper into the nature of the South as a geographical, conceptual, and mythical space, and to utilize his model, one that is helpful in understanding the South as it exists in the world of Hamilton's work. The South cannot

[31] Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 117.
[32] Ibid.

only be defined as a set of moments or interactions across history. Neither can the South be merely defined as a combination of discrete aesthetics, customs, languages, ethnicities, or cultural groups. In Hamilton's work there are elements of the South, as she sees it, that take the form of different media. She pieces together these sounds, images, and feelings of the South that may or may not be recognizable to her viewers.

Hamilton is undoubtedly conscious of the fraught history of the American South. Beneath the stereotypical bucolic version of the South, there exists a dark underbelly—a historical record full of atrocities committed across centuries against enslaved Africans and their descendants. The legacy of slavery is visible across the region in overt and covert ways. If the South is viewed primarily as a static place, the institution of slavery becomes a historical period that must be seen as locked in the past and which only exists in monuments in the present.

This is not necessarily how the South appears or is experienced in Hamilton's work. In the *Pitch* exhibition, Hamilton created a space that is partially immersive with the de-limbed trunks of pine trees installed directly on the gallery floor and stretching up toward the ceiling (figures 1 and 11). The four-channel video *FLORIDALAND* (figures 5 and 17) was installed in a small, square gallery with one video channel projected onto each wall, offering up another partially immersive experience for viewers.[33] I use the term "partially immersive" here to describe an installation an artist has created to alter the gallery space in order to provide the effect that the viewer is occupying a different environment other than

[33] The version of the *FLORIDALAND* video that was displayed in the exhibition *Pitch* was a four-channel version of the work, but I base the majority of my analysis on the three-channel version of this work that was available to me outside of the gallery space.

the gallery, but which does not completely enclose the viewer in all directions. In a completely immersive installation, the space that the viewer enters into is enclosed and the space may be unrecognizable as a gallery.[34] When a viewer first walks into the gallery, it might seem as if one is entering into a representation of the South as a *site* or place that Hamilton is trying to conjure. In some ways, it is obvious that the environment Hamilton pieced together in *Pitch* could never completely represent the South. However, the symbolic charge of the materials in the installation encourages quick associations with various archetypes or stereotypes of the South. On the surface the pine logs can be reminiscent of the dense pine forests that mark Northern Florida landscape, some of which is shown in the *FLORIDALAND* video, but there no truly secure connection or association between pine trees and the essence of the South. Imagery of swamps and bald cypress trees also figure prominently in *FLORIDALAND*, which is an ecosystem stereotypically associated with the South, but not exclusive to it. When amalgamated together into a gallery installation, these materials and images combine to create a snapshot of the South as experienced by Hamilton from her particular perspective and position. In *Pitch*, Hamilton has conjured a feeling of a southern landscape based on her personal knowledge of the land, and by combining materials and sounds that are part of her experience and identity.

As I apply de Certeau's concept of space to the South, it comes into relief as a nexus of historical, cultural, and geographic vector points that are constantly repositioning

[34] An example of a completely enclosed, immersive space would be Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Rooms* series.

themselves in relation to one another. An example that illuminates the South as a space is the concept of the afterlives of slavery: the ripples and echoes of the enslavement of black people and the violence inflicted on black bodies that stretches into the present—a "continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding."[35] The legacy of slavery and white supremacy in the United States is now understood by certain scholars in Black Studies as a force that has outlived the Emancipation Proclamation of 1862 and the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, through the periods of Reconstruction and Jim Crow, and even beyond the Civil Rights era, up until the present, and which is now embodied in different forms of injustice that are both visible and invisible. In Saidiya Hartman's book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), she explicates the concept of the afterlives of slavery as a calculus that was enacted in the past, but which stretches into the present and continues to violently affect black lives:

> If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery.[36]

Christina Sharpe, who invokes Hartman throughout her work *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, goes further to provide examples of how the afterlives of slavery play out in contemporary social and political systems:

> And here, in the United States, it means living and dying through the policies of the first US Black president; it means the gratuitous violence of stop-

[35] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 14.
[36] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.

> and-frisk and Operation Clean Halls; rates of Black incarceration that boggle the mind (Black people represent 60 percent of the imprisoned population); the immanence of death as "a predictable and constitutive aspect of *this* democracy" […] Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence.[37]

If the institution of slavery is viewed as firmly fixed in the past, as something that has happened and is no longer happening, it characterizes the South more so as a place rather than a space, as something static, immovable, and unchangeable. Instead, if slavery is understood as a "vector of direction," with a speed and a particular relation to the passage of time, it becomes a significant aspect of the experience of the South as a space. By considering the ways the South can be both a place *and* a space, this allows for more room to elucidate how the South is spatialized as it is represented in Hamilton's work.

On one level, the South can certainly be understood as a place. It is, for many, a location of relative stability in a conceptual sense. The South as a place can be understood as the confluence of certain historical events, relations, and choices that have seemingly come to rest or settle in this particular geographic location. However, as this place, the mechanisms and operations that actively define this living region in the present are only accessible to those who occupy an insider position in the South. In the passage below, de Certeau describes the experience of a place in relation to history:

> Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body. "I feel good here": the well-being under-expressed in the language it appears in like a fleeting glimmer is a spatial practice.[38]

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[37] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 15.

[38] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 108.

In the excerpt above, de Certeau identifies the enigmatic quality that is inherent to a place. One's position in relation to the South, or one's status as a "Southerner," is not something that is easily defined in language. It is best delineated through the lens of experience. Hamilton herself has described being in the South as a feeling—something that you "just know" once you are there.[39] In the *Pitch* exhibition, for example, viewers had the opportunity to enter into the gallery space and encounter Hamilton's representation of the South as either a place or space depending on their own experiences within or in relation to the South and its history. Again, de Certeau describes a space as, "...the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. On this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken…In short, *space is a practiced place*."[40] If a place is flat or static, then a space is a layered, moving set of relations made through different spatializing operations.

How exactly does the South operate as both a place and space? Is Hamilton's particular representation of the South more accessible to viewers as a place or a space? This is where stories in their many forms come into play. De Certeau asserts that, "Stories thus carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places. They also organize the play of changing relationships between places and spaces."[41] In Hamilton's work, the South can be understood as a space that is constantly moving and

[39] "Interview with Allison Janae Hamilton," telephone interview by author, February 2020.
[40] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 117.
[41] Ibid, 118.

changing, as a location that is *practiced* or utilized for a particular narrative purpose. Conceptualizing the South in this way offers an opportunity to discuss how stories have shaped, and continue to shape, representations of the region and the region itself.

The sources that Hamilton has pieced together are parts of stories or stories in themselves that are connected to the South. There is not a clear delineation of each particular source she is inspired by; rather, they amalgamate together to constitute some of the narratives that animate the South for Hamilton. I view her use of folklore, natural materials from the landscape, sounds of animals, labor rituals, or hymns and other song, as vectors of direction that can be mobilized in the South as a space. These elements occupy the same sphere alongside other vectors of direction, such as the histories of slavery and its afterlives, as well as the particulars of the South's geography, environment, culture, art, languages, and more. These vectors might even come to compete with each other for a particular position or for more area in the space. Occasionally, the different vectors of direction will collide with or rub up against each other as they are in motion. In those moments, the interaction might produce a tension or conflict that illuminates their velocity and the interplay of different subjects and objects in the space.

A recent example from the summer of 2020 that illustrates these interactions is the uprising among activists to dismantle, deface, or knock down monuments of historical figures that were orchestrators and perpetrators of racial violence and white supremacy in the United States or during its colonial past.[42] This is a collision between two opposing

[42] Eddie Chambers, "Statues, Statues, They All Fall Down," Progressive.org, June 12, 2020, https://progressive.org/dispatches/statues-statues-they-all-fall-down-chambers-200612/.

histories—one that is insistent on maintaining the monuments of a hegemonic history, whether it be the Confederacy or the "founding fathers"; versus a history that is more expansive, polyvalent, self-aware, and ethical, and which seeks to reorient consumers of history toward a radical future. These two opposing approaches to history exist in the same space of the South and are monumentalized by their own claimed places ("instantaneous configuration of positions") respectively. If *space is a practiced place* as de Certeau proposes, then both of these historical forces can be used by people to actively transform places, like a former plantation in the South for example, into a *space*. An Antebellum plantation as a place could be practiced in a way that enacts either of the above histories, but it is not guaranteed to be either unless there are individuals/subjects/consumers that are using or manipulating the story and subsequently the place through a series of actions and choices. The consumers and users "actualize" such places or spaces, as de Certeau would define them.

Hamilton as an artist can be understood as a consumer of the various histories (stories) that are constitutive of the space of the South. Through art-making, Hamilton manipulates, reorganizes, and imagines the South into a space by piecing together and juxtaposing elements from her own experience and her historical knowledge. Hamilton uses stories in their various forms, such as Zora Neal Hurston's literary work *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but like many artists her choice of stories are not all identifiable and able to be categorized. [43] De Certeau addresses this stating:

[43] Hamilton, "A Tangible History of the American South."

> The forms of this play [how stories labor to transform places into spaces or vice versa] are numberless, fanning out in a spectrum reaching from the putting in place of an immobile and stone-like order (in it, nothing moves except discourse itself, which, like a camera panning over a scene, moves over the whole panorama), to the accelerated succession of actions that multiply spaces (as in the detective novel or certain folktales, though this spatializing frenzy nevertheless remains circumscribed by the textual place).[44]

De Certeau's distinctions between place and space are useful tools to help pull apart the enmeshed components that constitute the South for Hamilton. The more one examines Hamilton's conception of the South, it becomes apparent that there are very few, if any, objective truths about the South that stand on their own and are independent of personal experience. Even the geographical boundaries of the South could be contested or understood differently by individuals according to their own subjective observations and experiences. Something that I alluded to earlier is how the South can be interpreted differently by each viewer that encounters Hamilton's work, and disparities between these interpretations ranges in varying degrees.

In each viewer's mind, there exists a different version of the South, and these versions all constitute an "authentic" South in a way—they represent the spatialization of the South as a space of relations. There exists a particular South in my mind, in Hamilton's mind, in a curator's or critic's mind, and in the individual minds of a multitude of other viewers that have encountered her work in New York or elsewhere. There is a South that exists in the mind of someone who is from Alabama versus someone who is from North Carolina. There is also a South that is constructed by someone who has never been there in

[44] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 118.

person, or who has only read about the South in books or seen it represented in mass culture.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, Hamilton multiplies the space of the South in her work by creating her own version of folklore and a fantastical world that reimagines what the South is and can look like. In the *Pitch* exhibition, the multiplicity of the South is created by juxtaposing symbolic elements in relation to each other (even literally, as they are installed in the gallery space). As discussed earlier, Hamilton sometimes lifts these elements directly from the southern environment she is attached to. Other elements, such as the haints depicted in her photo and video work, and in her sculpture installation *Seven Creatures* (2017/2018) (figure 10), have a fantastical quality that suggests the existence of an otherworldly realm. These mythical beings are only familiar to those like Hamilton and others who have personal experience with or dedicated investment into living and perpetuating these fantastical narratives. These beings are part of a South that originate in Hamilton's experience and thought world, or in the experience of others like her, who occupy a similar position in relation to the South. However, no two individuals can have the exact same experience of and ideas about the South, even if they are in close proximity to each other, and share a familiarity with some of the same elements (vectors of direction) that circulate in the space of the South.

Hamilton puts the South into motion by practicing it as a space by joining together the fantastical and the "real" or familiar in the same literal and conceptual space where they can take on their own velocity and direction in relation to each other and other vectors that exist within the space of the South. They have the potential to collide into one another in

this space, creating a clash or moment of opposition and tension—viewers might experience this as the tension between the elements that fantastical versus the ones that are real. One's awareness of the duality of the familiar and the unfamiliar is also an experience of these moving vectors bumping into one another, which reveals them as both mutually present *and* in motion, rather than static. The story that unfolds in the *Pitch* exhibition can be interpreted using de Certeau's definition of story, that which transforms the South from a place into a space by experientially "setting into motion" objects (a pine tree log, for example) and subjects (like a haint). Speaking on objects in particular, de Certeau observes that, "…the awakening of inert objects (a table, a forest, a person that plays a certain role in the environment) which, emerging from their stability, transform the place where they lay motionless into the foreignness of their own space."[45] Again, this is not the only way to encounter or decipher Hamilton's work, but conceptualizing the South as a space and place provides a generative framework for exploring the operation of myth in her work.

Myth as a Structure

The presence of the fantastical in Hamilton's work suggests a connection to folklore, or more broadly, to myth—a term which is used by Hamilton herself to describe parts of her work and her influences, and it has also been repeated by observers of her work (critics, writers, curators).[46] Other related terms that have been used alongside myth in

[45] Ibid.

[46] Hamilton, "Biography"; Hamilton, "A Tangible History of the American South"; Susan Cross and Larry Ossei-Mensah, *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch (exhibition brochure)* (North Adams, MA: MASS MoCA, 2018); "An Interview with Allison Janae Hamilton on "Pitch," interview by Zaina Alsous, Scalawag Magazine, August 23, 2018; "Sweet Milk in the Badlands: Allison Janae Hamilton," interview by Courtney

descriptions of her work are: ritual, magic, folklore, epic, haunting, fantastic. The stories or myths that exist in Hamilton's work are in a constant play with each other, and she reconfigures certain stories or myths associated with the American South, whether rooted in spirituality, religious ritual, or the lore of the natural environment, for present day use.[47] For example, the Southern myth of haints and the generational knowledge of homeopathic healing rituals, both passed down to Hamilton from her family, are two types of generational stories in the "ensemble of movements" of Hamilton's work. In this section, I ask the question, "Are the stories in Hamilton's work, as embodied in their various forms (as narratives or objects), the myths themselves? Or are they actually the residue of a larger mythic structure that is at work?"

While the term "myth" is invoked often in descriptions of Hamilton's work, it is difficult to immediately identify how myth is operating, and what it does for viewers of her work. The method I use to scrutinize myth in Hamilton's work began with a close looking at the tangible and intangible dualities in the work. I found that these dualities are the gateway to understanding the mechanism of myth, but the work is not limited to these dualities in and of themselves. Moving beyond the dualities opens up myth and illustrates it as a discursive structure that can take on various forms that signify messages and ideas. The concept of myth can be approached in a variety of ways and from the perspective of several scholarly disciplines. In this section, I invoke ideas from Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957), and Carolyn Kay Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* and read

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Simchak, Newfound Journal, 2016. More sources similar to the ones listed here can be found on Hamilton's website: http://www.allisonjanaehamilton.com/news-1.

[47] Hamilton, "A Tangible History of the American South."

these texts alongside the artwork, not to "explain" Hamilton's work, but rather to give it more dimension. Again, the South can be understood as *both* a place and a space; an entity with dimension, movement, and velocity.

Dualities: A Gateway to Myth

I am interested in examining which aspects of southern identity and its relation to land and place can be identified and reconfigured by different spectators in the familiar yet ambiguous space of Hamilton's photographs. How do dualities, such as familiar/unfamiliar, that emerge in Hamilton's use of mythological sources expose the structure of myth itself and the *process* of its formation? What are the implications of using myth to represent a place/space such as the American South? My focus is on the formation and operation of myth as a structure and force, and the role that dualities play in facilitating this process, rather than an explication of each of the specific forms that myth deploys and uses as signifiers of messages.

Hamilton's meditations on land and place unfold through a play, or repeated oscillation, between experiential dualities: familiar/unfamiliar, unsettling/seductive, transparency/ambiguity. In her photo series *Sweet milk in the badlands* (2015-2018), Hamilton composed photographs of "haint" figures as well as views of the natural landscape. In a photograph from this series titled *No danger in the water* (2015) (figure 13), Hamilton draws out the landscape's potential to be what she describes as both haunting and beautiful.[48] In this photograph, the exact location of the subject is unknown or

[48] Ibid.

ambiguous. The natural light creates a slightly opaque sheen across the water, which fades in the foreground to reveal plant life reaching up from the cloudy depths and stretching toward the surface of the still, calm water. Some viewers are likely unaware of the features that define a southern swamp or river, and most may not possess detailed knowledge about the freshwater plants or reptiles of the South's bayous. However, viewers can still draw connections between this image of water in an unidentifiable location and images of water in their mind's eye—a compilation of memories and encounters with water in other locations.

An initial glance at the murky depths as depicted in this photograph might generate fear in viewers—perhaps a fear of an unknown danger lurking below the surface—but as the title suggests, there is "no danger in the water," and this unease might gradually dissipate giving way to a curiosity about the ambiguity of the image. The photograph is closely cropped and composed so that viewers only see a small section of this body of water and nothing of its specific location. The blurry reflection of a tree in the top left corner of the photograph provides the only hint of water's surroundings. This could be any pond, bog, river, or lake in the South or elsewhere. Without background knowledge of Hamilton's connection to the rural landscapes of Northern Florida and Tennessee, one would not necessarily be able to pinpoint its location, adding to its mystery. *No danger in the water* captures the duality of familiarity and unfamiliarity in a singular image. It is at once specific to the landscape that inspires Hamilton, but is ambiguous enough that it also invites viewers to make their own associations.

In another photograph from the *Sweet milk in the badlands* series titled *The Hours* (2015) (figure 14), a "haint" figure sits on a moss-covered stoop outside an aging clapboard house. In the cultures of the American South, the vernacular term "haint" refers to a ghost or spirit entity that can be either malicious or benevolent. Similar to *No danger in the water*, it is not clear whether the scene in *The Hours* is meant to be visually unsettling and seductive. This haint figure wears a mask made of the skull and antlers of a stag and is flanked by two small suitcases, seemingly poised, ready for travel. The haint figure is in sharp focus, brightly lit by an external light source. It is wearing crisp, clean clothes, which make it stand in sharp contrast to the muted tones and textures of the house in the background: rusted iron, chipped paint, and weather-stripped siding. One might mistake this haint as an ordinary human if it were not for the stag skull mask it is wearing.

Curators Susan Cross and Larry Ossei-Mensah have described Hamilton's work as "flights of imagination rooted in the familiar."[49] The duality between familiarity and unfamiliarity in *The Hours* emerges in two ways. First, the physical structures captured in the photograph are recognizable (the exterior of an aging house), and viewers can assume that the haint figure is played by an actual human with familiar items used for her costume and props. Second, the presence of the mask in this photograph upends this perceived familiarity by suggesting a narrative that is rooted in a different version of reality, one that is informed by southern folklore. In *The Hours*, the haint's mythical status disrupts a setting based in reality that we as viewers might perceive as "real life." I attach the term "mythical"

[49] Cross and Ossei-Mensah, *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch (exhibition brochure)*, 5.

to the haint (and other aspects of Hamilton's work) because I am conceptualizing the haint as a mythical form or mythology in itself that signifies messages developed by southern subjects and actors. These figures, landscapes, and objects are connected to the legends and folklore of the South through mythology as a "system of communication" as Barthes defines it in his work *Mythologies* (1957).[50] However, without the knowledge of this figure in *The Hours* as a southern haint (a legendary being), this photograph is not necessarily evocative of the South on its own. Like *No danger in the water*, the scene could take place anywhere or refer to a myriad of other types of spirits represented in various cultural mythologies.

This purposeful ambiguity is reflected in Hamilton's careful balance between using the South as a major source, while also creating work that evades a clear definition of what is particularly "southern." Hamilton states, "I don't want it [my work] to be representative or a story of the South, or even about the South, it is just trying to figure out how do we understand all the ways the natural world around us comes into context [...] I always want the work to offer more questions than suggestions of an answer, or anything definitive, I want there to be more question marks."[51] The tension in Hamilton's work between what appears to be transparent or familiar, versus what is unclear or ambiguous serve as opportunities to reveal the structure and operation of myth in Hamilton's work—to see what myth is really *doing* in the work. Understanding how myth operates in her work allows me to better understand what the South does in her work specifically, and to bring

[50] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies: The Complete Edition, in a New Translation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 217.
[51] "An Interview with Allison Janae Hamilton on "Pitch," interview by Zaina Alsous.

into relief how her version of the South is distinct and dependent on her positionality. While Hamilton draws on her own deep personal connections to the South, her work is not explicitly autobiographical. An experience of her work depends heavily on what individual viewers bring to the table in their encounters with the work. Hamilton invites audience members to reconsider and confront their own notions of what constitutes southern identity or the South as a whole.

The photographs in *Sweet milk in the badlands* are created out of a southern landscape, but when viewed on their own in multiple contexts (whether in a gallery setting, or as a digital image online, etc.), they reflect an indeterminacy or vagueness of place. Myth can reveal itself in the form of stereotypes or tropes associated with a particular place. These tropes can be absorbed through contact with various networks of communication, e.g. caricatures in popular culture and other media, political rhetoric, or narratives and stories taught in education. Myth and its various forms are revealed in Hamilton's work partly because she is influenced by certain mythologies and uses them as sources for her visual work. Similar to how dualities can manifest two qualities or processes simultaneously in the same moment and space without immediate recognition of their difference, the operation of the myth, can occur even before a viewer or consumer of the myth realizes the process that has just unfolded in front of them.

Myth at Work

As mentioned above, the text that has informed much of my thought on the concept of myth is Barthes's *Mythologies*. I use this text as a guide to interrogate the use of the term

"myth" in descriptions of Hamilton's work. Barthes defines myth as a language, a "type of speech," or rather, "a mode of signification, a form."[52] According to Barthes, myth can exist either verbally or visually, as a piece of writing or as a picture. However, myth is not equivalent to the object or material that represents it.[53] In one of the essays published in *Mythologies*, Barthes's writes on the subject of "Romans in the Movies" which is an obviously different subject than the American South, but nonetheless, his observation is applicable here: "For if it is a good thing that a spectacle be created to make the world clearer, there is a culpable duplicity in confusing the sign with what is signified."[54]

In other words, myth as a "type of speech" and the various forms it engenders are not interchangeable. Just as a sign does not equal what is being signified, symbols used to represent the South are not immediately equivalent to each other or to the totality of "the South." Rather, myth is a form that is used in a social, discursive context for the purpose of signification; it is a process that needs to be socially negotiated. This "generic" (to borrow Barthes's term) conception of myth as a form of discourse or speech is helpful in both parsing Hamilton's use of visual forms of myth in her work that are rooted in the folklore of the South, and for exploring how myth-making can be understood in relation to the production of history. In regard to myth-making, Barthes posits that, "...one can conceive of very ancient myths, but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history which converts reality into speech [myth], and it alone rules the life and death of mythical

[52] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 217.
[53] Ibid, 218.
[54] Ibid, 21.

language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have a historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the "nature" of things."[55] When a viewer or consumer of a mythical form sees or perceives one message or symbol they inextricably are exposed to or consume another larger (or smaller) message that perpetuates the use of a particular myth—it becomes naturalized through repetitive use.

In the description of *Sweet milk in the badlands*, Hamilton writes, "[The series] looks toward ritual, storytelling, and trance in search of the connections between landscape and selfhood, place and disturbance. It invites an uncanny cast of haints to lead the viewer through the beginnings of an epic tale that animates the land as a guide and witness."[56] Hamilton's titles and descriptions of her work are often purposely veiled, yet suggest broad themes of myth and story. At other points Hamilton has used different terms combined with myth to describe her work, e.g. "epic myth," "epic mythologies," "myths and fables."[57] If I were to track each individual source Hamilton folds into her works, outline the specific oral or written texts that inspire her, and then use this knowledge to explicate her work, this would be forcing Hamilton's work into an analytical framework that is not compatible with her practice and style of working. Instead, I selectively mirror some of Hamilton's methods to let my interpretation operate on her own terms.

Even though Hamilton is forthcoming about the way she weaves together the fantastical and the real in her work, it is still possible for viewers to subconsciously misread

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[55] Ibid, 218.

[56] Allison Janae Hamilton, "Sweet Milk in the Badlands (series description)," accessed November 15, 2018, http://www.allisonjanaehamilton.com/sweet-milk-in-the-badlands).

[57] Hamilton, "Sweet Milk in the Badlands (series description)"; Hamilton, "Biography," www.allisonjanaehamilton.com/biography.

what is authentically southern for Hamilton according to her specific subject position within the South as a space. Myth, as a system of communication and as a vehicle for delivering messages, operates in Hamilton's work to represent ideas and symbols that come out of the South. Objects and images such as wild horse hair, taxidermy alligators in the shape of the ouroboros symbol (figure 8), masked haints, views of bald cypress trees in a swamp, and paintings done in the style of vernacular yard signs (figures 11-12) (all of which are represented in either the *Pitch* exhibition or *Sweet milk* series), have the potential to signify the South depending on *who* is encountering them and *how* they are encountering them. As a rural southerner whose family worked the land as farmers, Hamilton developed a close relationship to the natural landscape that surrounded her. She has an intimate connection with these the flora and fauna, and bodies of water that mark the landscapes of Florida and Tennessee. Materials and places that are familiar and sacred to her, might be simultaneously inaccessible to viewers from outside of the South.

For Hamilton, these things represent her personal experiences growing up in the South, and are authentic to *her* from her own subject position. However, when any outsider to the South (keeping in mind their varying degrees of separation from the South), encounters these symbols that are mobilized and activated through myth, the concept of the South is destabilized. The idiosyncratic nature of the South in Hamilton's work is only revealed when the mechanics of myth are disrupted, and myth as a structure is revealed to be separate from its present embodiment in a particular visual form. The mechanism of myth is usually hidden behind the image, and its message absorbed at such a rapid speed. Once this mechanism is revealed, the images it feeds on lose their mythic certainty. In the

case of Hamilton's work, the power and clarity of familiar symbols of the South are diminished.

The symbols Hamilton uses to represent the South as she knows it—the "myths and fables" that inspire her work—can be consumed by outsider-viewers, but they operate differently on these individuals in comparison to Hamilton. In one way, the phenomenon of viewers transforming an artwork through their own perceptions is inherent to the viewing of all art. Artists often make work that stems from the intimacy of their personal, subjective experience, but their work can be viewed, interpreted, and consumed in vastly different ways than the artist originally intended.

Once again, I invoke Barthes to illuminate the process of myth formation and operation in Hamilton's work: "…for it is human history which converts *reality into speech* [myth], and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language… myth is a type of speech *chosen* by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the "nature" of things."[58] [emphasis mine] Hamilton is the generator of her own idiosyncratic history of the South. This is a history that is ultimately only fully accessible to her. This history produces and *chooses* a structure of myth that mobilizes itself in various verbal and visual forms that are then sent out into the world to be consumed, altered, or opposed. Can we any longer say exactly what the South *is*? Is it represented in a photograph of a southern river that captures both feelings of haunting and beauty? Is it a home to haints? Is it a monument to the legacy of slavery? Is it a hotbed of ideological conservatism? Is it a paradise of unrelenting humidity and

[58] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 218.

ecological biodiversity? All of these questions have the potential to be turned into "true" statements, but these truths are contingent upon one's personal beliefs and supporting experiences within or in relation to the conceptual space of the South.

Hamilton's system of signification that she invokes through myth exists alongside many others about the South. If all of her work was created around completely unfamiliar elements of stories, then her work would not register with many viewers. On the contrary, her work has attracted much positive attention in the short time that she has been a professional artist. This suggests that Hamilton is tapping into a system of signification (myth) about the South that is comprehensible in its form and delivery, even if the granular elements of her work, such as the materials that she uses, are not familiar to some viewers. Barthes speaks directly to this shared "consciousness":

> But this is the point: we are no longer dealing here with a theoretical mode of representation: we are dealing with *this* particular image, which is given for *this* particular signification. Mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness that one can reason about them while discounting their substance.[59]

It is difficult to decipher the exact meaning of an individual object or image in Hamilton's work when they isolated from each other, whether it be a sculptural spear with horse hair, a fencing mask embellished with feathers, a pine log, a handmade metal tambourine, or a singular photograph. All of these things were installed in the *Pitch* exhibition and result in the suggestion of a southern landscape through the association among them in the gallery space. The exact sources for these objects and images are

[59] Ibid, 219.

ambiguous while also remaining generally familiar. Those who are familiar with the rural South and happen to know the same "feeling" of the South as Hamilton, are more likely to be able to participate in the shared language of a "signifying consciousness" about the South and what it signifies for her. However, Hamilton's chosen symbolism may be lost on those who do not occupy the same position in the South as her (e.g. other southerners with different experiences of the South, or who are from different locations in the geographical South). Her symbolism may be difficult to comprehend for those who are outsiders to the South (non-southerners) who are not familiar with this symbolic language at all. Their encounters with Hamilton's work could extend in all different directions that make the South less concrete. Or instead, they may bypass all idiosyncratic conceptions of the South and simply absorb the common, stereotypical symbols and myths of the South that they can pull out of Hamilton's work.

I do not use Barthes's theory of myth to merely explain Hamilton's work; rather, I utilize it to provide a deeper access into the work below the shallow surface of its "haunted beauty." The slipperiness of what the South can or cannot be does not have to be viewed pessimistically, but it must be acknowledged. It is imperative to recognize the mechanisms of myth and the process of its formation to comprehend its potential as a signifying force, as well as its limitations.

Chapter 2: Problematizing Myth

In this chapter, I continue to explore the mechanisms of myth in Hamilton's work, and I push further to use speculative methods that problematize the form and content of

myth. I also address the reasons for these apparent destabilizations in myth that appear in her work. I deploy ideas from two additional texts that have been key to my understanding of myth and place: *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (1986) by Carolyn Kay Steedman, mentioned earlier, and *The Country and the City* (1973) by Raymond Williams. The texts by Steedman and Williams have allowed me to excavate further into the cause of destabilizations of myth in Hamilton's work.

Accessing Experiential Knowledge

In this first section, I consider questions that expand upon the inquiries I posed at the beginning of this thesis: What does it look like to write an art historical account of a contemporary subject and what issues might arise? How can I historicize the work of a living artist, when her work is still evolving and unfolding? What theoretical frameworks are appropriate to apply to an artist who uses sources that are not easily accessible or are intangible forms of experience and knowledge? How does my study of the operation of myth relate to these methodological questions?

In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Steedman combines autobiography, history, and Marxist and psychoanalytic theory to provide a study of working-class life in 1950s Great Britain. What drives Steedman's analysis is her reflection on her own childhood in relation to depictions of working-class childhoods by her fellow historians. Among the theories that Steedman uses in *Landscape for a Good Woman* is "structures of feeling," a concept developed by the literary and cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams. While developing *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Steedman faced the issue of not having enough

information on her subject or a sufficiently developed interpretive framework in the work of other historians to be able to produce such a history. While Steedman's reasons for not being able to construct a proper history of her subject are ultimately different than mine, I share with her the resistance to teleological explanations and the need to apply an alternative interpretive framework that is more specific to my subject at hand, but which may not be a common historical method of assessing sources. Steedman's story of her and her mother's working class childhoods, as the main case-studies of the book, could not fit into the mold of the established, central stories that presumably constitute a history of the working class in Britain, "I am unable to perform an act of historical explanation in this way."[60] Steedman's account of a working-class life was one on the periphery or border of the established and central story of British culture and labor. In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Steedman's primary focus was on stories of class, but her observations on the limitations to histories of various kinds are useful guides for me to think about how to develop my own methods to answer my own questions, even though my and Steedman's subject matter are very different. I use Steedman's project as a foil for my study of Hamilton in order to draw out the particular issues and limitations that I face in doing this work on a young, contemporary artist.

I have found that there are limits to the stories I can tell about Hamilton's practice, as well as limits to what *type* of sources I can access. The issue that I have encountered is not a scarcity of sources or material to work with (which was the issue for Steedman), in

[60] Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 21.

fact, Hamilton is inspired by such an array of sources that I am faced with the opposite problem from Steedman's. While I am able to identify, trace, and classify many of Hamilton's sources (e.g. novels she has read or photographers she is influenced by), there are also many intangible sources that I cannot access because of the nature of their form. The intangible, primarily oral forms that Hamilton has referenced are family conversations and gossip, superstitions, homeopathic remedies for illness, memories, and shared family stories.[61] While I may not be able to fully access these sources, I rely on a theoretical framework for intangible forms of experiential knowledge that can help to elucidate them in part.

In LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant's essay, "'I Had a Praying Grandmother': Religion, Prophetic Witness, and Black Women's Herstories," published in the edited anthology *New Perspectives on the Black Intellectual Tradition* (2018), she outlines types of experiential knowledge as embodied in black experience, particularly in black women's experiences and "women-centered networks."[62] Manigault-Bryant argues that the intangible archive of stories and knowledge passed down, specifically through grand-matrilineal networks in African American communities, can be categorized into the following four forms: perspective knowledge, experiential knowledge, faith knowledge, and conjure knowledge.[63] Manigault-Bryant's framework for perspective knowledge and

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[61] Macarena Merinho, "LO REAL EN LO FANTÁSTICO THE REALITY WITHIN FANTASY," *Arte Al Limite*, May/June 2015, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/528e66a2e4b0a636d24ccd51/t/59ad7820a9db093b3b1a1cc3/1504540707265/Allison Janae Hamilton-Arte Al Limite MayJune2015.pdf; "Interview with Allison Janae Hamilton," telephone interview by author, February 2020).
[62] Manigault-Bryant, "'I Had a Praying Grandmother," 116.
[63] Ibid, 118.

experiential knowledge is especially applicable to Hamilton because of the way she draws from family interactions and conversations to create her work. Manigault-Bryant defines these two categories in the following ways:

> […] *perspective knowledge*, the ways of knowing directly influenced by one's particular point of view and location; *experiential knowledge*, the awareness that comes from what one actually lives and observes (versus imagines or hypothesizes) […] These forms of knowledge are as valid a historical source as more traditional (written) forms of archival information because of how they are internalized and experientially drawn upon by black women, and because of how they have historical implications comparable to those of written sources.[64]

Hamilton also has close relationships with the women in her family and often has them perform in her video works (e.g. her mother and godmother are performers in *FLORIDALAND*, along with Hamilton herself). Hamilton has also described her close relationship with her great aunt, another grandmother figure, and she recalls memories of making art projects with her and listening to her tell stories.[65] While Hamilton's sources of perspective and experiential knowledge are not necessarily on the "borderlands" in the sense that Steedman describes, this type of knowledge (most often shared orally from person to person in a family) has been marginalized and undervalued as a valid historical source in "proper" histories. Traditional archival methodologies are not able to accommodate intangible sources that are not textual (written) or physical (materialized in various forms). These types of sources seem central to Hamilton's conceptualization of her artistic process, but they are the most difficult to elucidate because they are intangible and

[64] Ibid.
[65] Merinho, "LO REAL EN LO FANTÁSTICO THE REALITY WITHIN FANTASY."

they often only exist internally in the person that is experiencing and embodying them, and they are subject to constant translation and adaptation. Other perspective and experiential sources that were part of Hamilton's everyday life in the South include, "…folktales, hunting and farming rituals, African American nature writing, and hymns both religious and secular."[66] Furthermore, Hamilton revisits memories of her upbringing in the South, "… [the] everyday confluences of life, labor, and land were the basis of my experience of the world," she writes.[67] This combination of sources requires alternative methods of analysis, which is why it is challenging to disentangle what is unique to Hamilton's direct experience from what is borrowed or adopted by her from various sources, and is therefore more likely to operate as myth with the power to perpetuate stereotypes about the South.

The Instability of Myth

It is necessary to pose further questions about the relationship between the types of sources and their origins that Hamilton meshes together in her work and how exactly they are in tension with each other. I ask and address the following questions: Are all of the stories and sources contained in Hamilton's work authentic to her own lived experience in the South? Is she close enough to and familiar enough with these sources to be able to control them for her own purposes, or are they borrowed and therefore more likely to be co-opted by the operations of myth that she does not control or is not completely conscious of? Another way of framing this is asking what is most familiar to Hamilton, and what

[66] Allison Janae Hamilton, "A Tangible History of the American South."
[67] Ibid.

specifically does she draw out of the *rural* South that makes these sources distinctive from mass, naturalized myths?

Once again, I return to a discussion of how myth operates, and I expand upon Barthes's theory of myth to include Steedman's observations in *Landscape for a Good Woman*:

> The myths need recasting to become interpretive devices for such material. [...] But the point of the symbolic scene lies at the *moment of its use*, not in historical time. [...] The official myths must place us in this extreme difficulty, for they have become more than the framework of a therapeutic discipline – that of psychoanalysis – they have become the stuff of our 'cultural psychology', the system of everyday metaphors by which we see ourselves and our past.[68]

Steedman argues that it is most productive to consider how exactly a myth is operating or being used in a particular historical moment or in the present. According to this viewpoint, myths are operative tools that can be used to understand the lived experience and temporal moment of those using the form and/or content of myth. Similarly, Barthes's theory of myth emphasizes the fact that the structure of myth and its various forms are almost always meshed so closely together that the historical origin or temporal specificity of the myth (the metaphor) becomes invisible or indiscernible. With Steedman's approach in mind, the question arises of how Hamilton is *using* a particular myth or mythical form—like the haint, for example. What does Hamilton achieve (or what is inevitably achieved regardless of her intention) in her work as she utilizes myths that have deep historical origins, but which are being deployed in the present? Does Hamilton use myths in ways that are

[68] Ibid, 74-75. [emphasis mine]

consistent with their historical use and origins, or does she co-opt them for her own purposes and goals in the present? (thereby altering the meaning or message derived from the myth, while maintaining the overall structure of the myth and the process by which myth operates) In other words, I am interrogating whether the myths Hamilton uses in her work are experienced and understood (by her or by others) as temporally and spatially specific, or if, on the other hand, the myths are interpreted by various viewers as naturalized "everyday metaphors" that are applicable to their present day realities.

The haints in the *Sweet milk in the badlands* series and which also appear in *FLORIDALAND* are performed by Hamilton's friends and family (for example, her mother performed as the haint Brecencia (figure 15)). In each of the photographs, the haints wear masks of some sort (the performers' faces are always covered), most of which are made from taxidermy animal remains or animal skulls and embellished with feathers or antlers (figures 14-16). Hamilton states that these "uncanny" haints are meant to "animate the land as a guide and witness."[69] The backdrop of each photograph is either the natural landscape, or a nondescript structure such as a house or old church building. The scene in each photograph is bereft of any other figure except for the haints that pose statically or are captured in motion. While the exact ritual or epic tale that the haints are part of is unidentifiable, the haints themselves can be seen as signifiers of an influential, prevalent myth about the South as a place imbued with magic. This cultural myth of the South as mysteriously haunted with "voodoo" (Vodou) or Hoodoo could have developed out of the

[69] Allison Janae Hamilton, "Sweet Milk in the Badlands (series description)."

introduction of religious traditions into the region that arrived during the period of Transatlantic slavery or came by way of the Caribbean's African diasporic communities. While for Hamilton the haints have a personal resonance and narrative power that she utilizes to explore the land as a central protagonist, there is a likelihood for destabilization here, between her own individual conception of the South and genuine interest in Hoodoo spirituality, and a naturalized myth of the South as a mysterious space of magic.

Here Steedman pinpoints what is so difficult about myth: "Yet even seen in this way, the official myths continue to present difficulties, and much of this difficulty is to do with what happens when the stuff of one discipline, one mode of thought, is used as evidence within another."[70] Steedman argues that "official myths" are mistakenly understood as universal or "eternal" when they are actually only applicable to a specific place and time, in other words they have a "particularity" as Steedman describes (e.g. the historical boundaries of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis can only really tell us about the particularity of late nineteenth and early twentieth century bourgeois, patriarchal family in Vienna).[71] These seemingly "official myths" that operate as widely held presumptions, actually have a particularity (to borrow Steedman's term) to them that is obscured. Similarly, haints as a form of myth have a historical particularity to them that is concealed by the way in which they are operationalized in Hamilton's work. The myth of haints and related lore are anchored in a historical moment where the myth served a particular purpose for those that originally used it—with the purpose to understand and make sense of

[70] Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, 75.
[71] Ibid.

everyday lived experience in that moment. When Hamilton lifts the mythological haint from its original context, and as the myth has evolved and changed in use over time and when Hamilton's has attached her own particularities onto this myth, the myth of haints and magic can become mistakenly understood as an "eternal" symbol of the South.

The speed at which the haints in Hamilton's work have the potential to be misread as embodiments of an "official myth" (to borrow Steedman's term) of the South by those who are outsiders to Hamilton's subject position, or outsiders to the South overall, is incredibly rapid, almost instantaneous. But, even when outsider-viewers encounter the haints in *Sweet milk in the badlands* and the operation of the myth is able to unfold, these mythological beings are not actually consciously perceived as myths; rather, they are absorbed simply as just "the way things are" for the South. They are assumed to be "natural." Steedman also speaks to this particular operation of metaphor, "[myth] is made out of metaphors that look as if they describe nothing at all, but rather simply *are* the way the world is."[72] Haints and the lore associated with them may have served as a local framework that organized everyday life and daily rituals for historical subjects in a different temporal moment. Conversely, Hamilton's use of the haints in a fantastical setting as visual protagonists in her photographs ultimately changes the message they communicate, and she transforms them into interpretive devices that are indistinguishable from "official myths" of the South.

[72] Ibid, 77.

However, Hamilton's use of haints and their ability to be interpreted and consumed as official myths may account, in part, for the allure of her images and the recognition she has received early on in her career. The misinterpretation of haints as official myths or "truths" about the South, and the general enchanted, mysterious quality that is often ascribed to the South (especially its swamplands) verges on romanticism. Hamilton does not intend to romanticize the South, a space that is fraught with a violent history that she is well aware of and familiar with, but the process of romanticizing is a likely outcome considering how myth operates and is destabilized in her work. Is there a way to reconcile the specificity of Hamilton's lived experience, her investment in researching the history of the South, her choice of sources, and the display of her work with the larger forces of official myths and romanticism that arise when audience and reception are considered?

A Knowable South

In his seminal work mentioned earlier, *The Country and the City*, Williams theorized the concepts of "known" and "knowable" communities and "structures of feeling," which he developed from his observation of the difference between conventional, often nostalgic and sentimental representations of the countryside in examples from English literature versus what he observed from first-hand experience growing up in a Welsh border town. While the context of Williams's analysis is the development of Capitalism in the rural English countryside and developing industrial city, I apply his terms here to further elucidate the form of the South in Hamilton's work. Williams describes a knowable community as a "matter of consciousness," in other words, a knowable

community is one that *can be* made known to those within it and even to those who are outsiders on the exterior.[73] He states, "But a knowable community, within country life as anywhere else, is still a matter of consciousness, and of continuing as well as day-to-day experience."[74] The position of those on the interior or exterior who are observers of a community (like the South, for example) is important to Williams's concept of what is known and knowable:

> It is also a function of subjects, of observers—of what is desired and what needs to be known. And what we have then to see, as throughout, in the country writing, is not only the reality of the rural community; it is the observer's position in and towards it; a position which is part of the community being known.[75]
>
> The knowable community is this common life which she [George Eliot] is glad to record with a necessary emphasis; but the known community is something else again—an uneasy contract, in language, with another interest and another sensibility.[76]

The orientation of a person "in and towards" the community in question is often what determines the degree to which it is knowable. Hamilton's particular position in relation to the South has shifted as she has developed as an artist, and especially since she moved from northern Florida to New York City after her undergraduate studies. As someone who was born and raised in the South, where her family has lived for generations, Hamilton was once fully embedded in her community of the South. She was able to experience and interpret her local part of the South as a wholly knowable community before relocating to

[73] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford University Press, 1973), 166.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid, 165.
[76] Ibid, 173.

New York City where she has now embedded herself in a different community or communities.

Hamilton's position in and towards the South is now more complicated, which has altered what can be knowable about the South for her. I am not suggesting that she is no longer intimately connected to her part of the South, her family, and her community there. Hamilton will always be authentically "from the South" in one sense, but this fact can exist alongside the reality of her changed orientation toward the South. Even though Hamilton continues to maintain a connection to the South, no matter how often she returns to visit family or create work there, by relocating her primary residence, she has fundamentally changed the quality of her status as an "insider" to the South. The known community of the South that Hamilton once had access to has been altered due to her spatial and social relocation from the rural South to New York City. Williams describes how a change in spatial and temporal location alters what can be knowable and how this change makes it difficult to preserve its original quality:

> The growth of towns and especially of cities and a metropolis; the increasing division and complexity of labour; the altered and critical relations between and within social classes: in changes like these any assumption of a knowable community—a whole community, wholly knowable—became harder and harder to sustain.[77]

One type of change in the nature of Hamilton's position in relation to the South comes into relief when considering the new influences, people, and experiences she has encountered since moving to New York. The one connection in particular that I raise for

[77] Ibid.

consideration is the influence of Joan Jonas's work on Hamilton and their professional relationship. I highlight the commonalities between Jonas's and Hamilton's work, specifically as they appear in *Pitch* and *FLORIDALAND*, to further elucidate the tensions that emerge from Hamilton's use of myth in relation to the South. I acknowledge that Hamilton, as a young artist, is still developing and honing her own distinct visual language and carving out a place for herself in the art world. I approach Jonas's and Hamilton's relationship as a case study that explores the complexity of artist relationships between mentor and mentee, how visual language and conceptual themes are transferred between artists that collaborate, and the implications for Hamilton's practice going forward. I also briefly revisit the contextual issues I raised in the introduction to this thesis regarding the surge of interest in art of the American South, and how Hamilton fits into this phenomenon. I do not argue that Jonas is the only, or even primary, influence on Hamilton's work. I explore the significance of their connection in order to add another layer to my discussion of the difficulty of myth and knowable communities and how this difficulty manifests in Hamilton's work.

Influences, Similarities, and Tensions

Hamilton and Jonas first met in 2015 at Columbia University in the City of New York (where, as mentioned earlier, Hamilton received her M.F.A. degree in 2017) during which time Jonas held a teaching residency. The following year, Hamilton applied for and was accepted into the Villa Iris Residency workshop taught by Jonas and hosted by the

Fundación Botín in Santander, Spain.[78] There Hamilton spent a significant amount of time working with and being mentored by Jonas. After her experience in this residency, Hamilton's practice changed significantly. Previously, Hamilton primarily worked with the medium of photography, but during the Villa Iris workshop Jonas encouraged her to explore performance and to use her talents as a vocalist.[79] During the workshop Hamilton collaborated with Jonas as a performer in one of the videos for the installation *Stream or river flight or pattern* (2016), and Jonas also invited Hamilton to record a song for the video based on lyrics from a Japanese Noh play and music by The Carters.[80]

Prior to 2015, Hamilton was already interested in folklore and myth, but the visual language she used to approach these broad themes centered more around magical realism, southern gothic style, and the carnivalesque.[81] In this period, Hamilton's visual style and photography practice was more so influenced by her background in fashion and costume history, which she studied as an undergraduate at Florida State University. For her 2014 series of photographs, *Kingdom of the Marvelous*, for example, Hamilton borrowed from the conventions of African American portraiture, vernacular photographs, and even editorial photography.[82]

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[78] Fundación Botín, "15 Artistas Procedentes De 10 Países Participarán En El Taller De Artes Plásticas De Villa Iris De La Artista Joan Jonas En Santander (15 Artists from 10 Countries Will Participate in Joan Jonas's Visual Arts Workshop at Villa Iris)," May 2, 2016, https://www.fundacionbotin.org/noticia/15-artistas-procedentes-de-10-paises-participaran-en-el-taller-de-artes-plasticas-de-villa-iris-de-la-artista-joan-jonas-en-santander.html.

[79] Michelle Weidman, "Allison Janae Hamilton's Kingdom of the Marvelous," *The Picture Professional*, no. 2 (2015), 16.

[80] Centro Botín, "Stream or River Flight or Pattern (exhibition description)," accessed March 20, 2020, https://www.centrobotin.org/en/obra/stream-or-river-flight-or-pattern/.

[81] Ibid; Allison Janae Hamilton, *Black Marvelous: An Examination of the Carnivalesque in African American Visual Culture*, PhD diss., New York University, 2015, iv.

[82] Centro Botín, "Stream or River Flight or Pattern (exhibition description)."

Starting in 2015 and continuing into the present, Hamilton has expanded beyond photography to dedicate more of her practice to creating multi-channel videos, sound works, performance, sculpture, and multimedia installation. Two video works by Hamilton that demonstrate Jonas's influence most prominently are *A balm for the living* (2016) and *FLORIDALAND* (2017/2018). Most notably, in *A balm for the living* Hamilton employs the effects of video projection, performing for a video camera in her bedroom while a previously recorded video she also made is projected onto her and the surrounding walls of the space. In this video, Hamilton, in part, performs repetitive choreographed gestures that are reminiscent of the movements performed by Jonas in various works. In *FLORIDALAND*, Hamilton pieced together multi-layered imagery throughout the video, superimposing different video footage that fades in and out of view. Reflections on the surface of water also figure prominently in *FLORIDALAND*, and the soundtrack for the video is a combination of sounds from nature, song, and the whirring of wind or white noise.[83] When considered all together, the formal elements in these two videos strongly echo the visual language that Jonas has pioneered in a number of her performance works over the years.

One work by Jonas that Hamilton likely drew this visual language from is the two-channel video for the exhibition *Stream or river flight or pattern* (2016) that Jonas developed in part while teaching at the Villa Iris Residency, and in which Hamilton participated as a performer and singer. This work incorporates imagery of rural landscapes,

[83] The shots of reflections on water in *FLORIDALAND* are also strongly evocative of the play and effect of reflections that Jonas produced in her 1974 single-channel video work *Disturbances*.

forests, towering trees, and explores human impact on the natural environment.[84] The reality of a global climate crisis and its disproportionate impact on people of color and rural communities is a theme that has become important for Hamilton.[85] Another work by Jonas that is a relevant to Hamilton is *They Come to Us without a Word II*, which premiered in the U.S. at The Kitchen in 2016, and is a performance related to Jonas's exhibition at the 56th Venice Biennale in the U.S. Pavilion and premiered in Venice in the summer of 2015. A slightly different iteration of this work was performed in New York at the Kitchen in 2016. Hamilton's video *FLORIDALAND* is especially evocative of the issues that Jonas explores in the body of work *They Come to Us without a Word* (video, performance, and installation). These issues include the fragility of the environment, looming threats of natural disaster, landscapes haunted by ghosts, and trance-like ritual.

The thematic and visual connections between *FLORIDALAND* and *They Come to Us without a Word* have been identified by others, including curator Chrissie Iles of the Whitney Museum of American Art who writes, "The generative power of her [Jonas's] approach can be seen in the work of a new generation of artists including Allison Janae Hamilton, whose video installation *FLORIDALAND* (2017) addresses racial and ecological issues in the history of the South through storytelling, personal history, and myth."[86] *FLORIDALAND* incorporates a great deal of layered imagery (a visual quality that marks Jonas's video works especially): footage of the rural southern landscape including pine

[84] Ibid.
[85] Hamilton, "A Tangible History of the American South."
[86] Chrissie Iles, "Chrissie Iles on They Come to Us without a Word," Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, February 26, 2019, https://fortmason.org/2019/02/chrissie-iles-on-they-come-to-us-without-a-word/).

trees, forests, swamps, and other bodies of water; sounds of birds and insects; footage of black subjects worshipping charismatically in a church (the exact setting is ambiguous); reflections on the surface of water; and footage from another one of her works *A balm for the living*.

Perhaps the most compelling connection between Hamilton and Jonas is their mutual interest in ghost stories or ghostly subjects. For *They Come to Us without a Word*, Jonas was inspired by the ghost stories told by local residents that she read in a local newspaper during her many summers spent in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. For Jonas, ghosts can represent the memory of a being, or the residue left behind by something that has disappeared or is in the process of disappearing (e.g. the extinction of animal species in the wake of climate change).[87] Hamilton is also interested in a type of ghostly subject that I have discussed throughout this thesis: haints. The belief in haints originated in the South, but its origins are ambiguous; however, the myth of haints most likely originated with the Gullah Geechee people who are descendants of Africans who were enslaved on plantations on the lower Atlantic coast.[88] The visual language that Jonas has developed over decades includes: performances as ghostly figures wearing white clothing while masked, performing repetitive trance-like movements and gestures, layering and superimposing imagery, use of animals as symbols, and working with simple everyday objects. For Jonas, these visual and formal choices are born out of her deep engagement with iterations of

[87] *Behind the Biennale: "They Come to Us without a Word"*, dir. Poppy De Villeneuve, perf. Joan Jonas, Vimeo, 2015, accessed August 2, 2020, https://vimeo.com/130060000).
[88] Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, "The Gullah Geechee People," accessed August 14, 2020, https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/thegullahgeechee/).

specific themes (like ghosts, for example) that are tied to a specific time and place (Nova Scotia, for example). Elements of this visual language, like the ones mentioned above, have been adopted by Hamilton, who also uses them to animate stories of ghostly beings, but within a fundamentally different temporal and spatial context than Jonas. While I am not able to explore this issue fully in this thesis, I raise it because I argue that it reveals another layer to the difficulty of myth and the slippage between how myth operates in Jonas's versus Hamilton's work.

Before meeting Jonas, Hamilton did incorporate masks into her work (mostly made from animal skulls, feathers, and fur), but this formal choice was, perhaps, affirmed and pushed further as a result of Jonas's mentorship. The way in which Hamilton uses and animates masks now is distinctively different after working with Jonas. Previously, as in the *Kingdom* series, Hamilton costumed some of the sitters in her photographs with masks, but due to the conventions of the portraiture she was emulating, the masks appear as props that are static. In *A balm for the living* and *FLORIDALAND*, some of the same masks appear, but they are animated by the movement of the performers, which makes the masks seem as if they are intrinsically a part of the haints who wear them. In more recent sculptural works from the last two years, Hamilton has turned to using fencing masks that are embellished with various materials. The theatrical qualities of these masks recall much more specifically the various more translucent the masks worn by Jonas in her performances.

While Hamilton has also developed her visual language from other sources, mentors, artists, and experiences, it is evident that she is strongly influenced by Jonas

considering the timeline of their connection and collaboration, and the noticeable shift that can be observed in her work starting in 2015 onward. Certainly, mentor-mentee relationships among artists are common, and art history is full of many accounts of these relationships. By exploring the visual and formal connections between these two artists, I am not attempting to critique Hamilton's artistic choices or her developing practice. Instead, in the effort to further understand the tensions and difficulties of myth that arise in Hamilton's work it is necessary to balance both an examination of the interior mechanisms of her work along with an investigation of some of the external factors that affect or her work.

The instability of myth in Hamilton's work—as a force that has either the ability to expand notions of the South or to essentialize it—is, in part, the result of her use of a visual language and method that are not fully her own, but too closely dependent on Jonas's visual language and not derived from intimate experiences in the South, and because of this lack of specificity in relation to Hamilton's own experiences, can be transformed by outside observers in a way that allows for generalizations about rather than nuanced experiences of the South.

A South That is Experienced, Not Guaranteed

Halfway through *FLORIDALAND*, each of the three video channels shows a static, black and white shot of bald cypress trees (also referred to as swamp cypress) situated in the still, reflective swamp waters in which they thrive. These trees almost appear fantastical or alien-like with their strange, bulbous trunks seemingly hovering above the surface of the

water, belying their deeply intertwined root structure that anchors them in the swamp. This is a moment of pause in the epic tale of haints that unfolds throughout the video. The layering of sounds, voices, and song continues to play while the shot of the cypress tree grove remains on screen for almost two minutes. In the central video channel, Hamilton has layered the static shot of the cypress trees with footage from her video *A balm for the living*. It is a ghostly scene that captures the feeling of the "simultaneous haunting and beauty" that Hamilton uses to describe her work.[89] Viewers senses are allowed to rest in this moment before the video resumes its fast pace and percussive rhythm. At the end the video, Hamilton provides another static shot that lasts for about thirty seconds, this time of an unrecognizable body of water (maybe a pond or calm lake), which reflects the sky above like a mirror, almost perfectly if not for the flying insects that flit around disturbing the surface of the still water. These two moments of relative stillness and meditation on a landscape of the South illustrate Hamilton's interest in using the land as the "central protagonist" in her work.[90]

The first time I viewed *FLORIDALAND*, it was difficult for me to not immediately perceive and experience these static, calm shots in the video as moments of rural, bucolic beauty. I am reminded of an excerpt from Henry David Thoreau's essay "Walking" that was published in *The Atlantic* in May 1862, in which he romanticizes the swamp as preferable to a town, city, or any cultivated garden. Thoreau writes, "Hope and the future

[89] Hamilton, "A Tangible History of the American South."
[90] As previously mentioned in footnote number eighty-three above, *FLORIDALAND* is visually evocative of Jonas's 1974 work *Disturbances*.

for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps," and he declares later in the essay, "I enter a swamp as a sacred place, a *sanctum sanctorum*."[91] When I first encountered Hamilton's work, the romantic allure of her imagery of the South and its various landscapes, swamp or otherwise, had a strong effect on me. However, in this thesis I resist the pull of romanticism, no matter how pleasurable it is. Studying myth and its structure, how it operates, the various forms it can take, and the messages it has the power to deliver has allowed me to push past a romanticized experience of a work in order to see its internal operations and grapple with its problematics.

In her published review for the book *Harlem is Nowhere: A Journey to the Mecca of Black America* (2011) by Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, the author Zadie Smith writes, "This is a lovely book about the romance—and dangers—of bibliophily […] No geographic or racial qualification guarantees a writer her subject […] Only interest, knowledge, and love will do that—all of which this book displays in abundance."[92] Here Smith speaks to the danger of romanticism, which not only applies to the love of texts, but also to the love of images, places, things, and feelings. In her review, Smith assesses how Rhodes-Pitts confronts the myth of Harlem and its long legacy as a "mecca" of black creativity. In an analogous way, I am confronting the myth(s) of the South in Hamilton's work, not with

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[91] Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," *The Atlantic*, June 1862, accessed August 14, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/06/walking/304674/).

[92] Zadie Smith, "New Books. ('Harlem Is Nowhere: A Journey to the Mecca of Black America', 'My Prize' and 'While the Women Are Sleeping')," *Harper's Magazine*, March 1, 2011, 67-68, accessed May 25, 2020, https://archive-harpers-org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/2011/03/pdf/HarpersMagazine-2011-03-0083339.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJUM7PFZHQ4PMJ4LA&Expires=1596140479&Signature=RoeNzDdoVcjdEnwpZdA6HEpTmw0=.

the goal of discovering *The* South, for one does not exist; rather, I wanted to know how and why I myself fell into myths of the South when viewing Hamilton's work. While Hamilton may not be automatically guaranteed the totality of the South merely by being born and raised there, she does lay claim to an experience of a South that is uniquely and idiosyncratically hers. As a young artist, she will continue to develop, grow, and adapt to influences and changes over the years to come. The South that she loves, the one that is hers, will continue to constantly evolve and transform as well. In the space of the South, although it may be complicated by the operations of myth, there will always be the opportunity to embrace instability.

Figures

Figure 1. Installation view of pine logs and yard sign paintings, 2018. From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch* on view at MASS MoCA from March 25th, 2018 – March 17th, 2019.

Figure 2. Installation view of spears, fencing masks, and taxidermy alligators, 2018. From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch* on view at MASS MoCA from March 25th, 2018 – March 17th, 2019.

Figure 3. Installation view of spears, fencing masks, taxidermy alligators, pine logs, 2018; and *Seven Creatures*, 2017, foam, mixed media. From the exhibition *Fictions* on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2017-2018); From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch* on view at MASS MoCA from March 25th, 2018 – March 17th, 2019.

Figure 4. Installation view of yard sign painting and photographs from the series *Sweet milk in the badlands*, 2015. From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch* on view at MASS MoCA from March 25th, 2018 – March 17th, 2019.

Figure 5. Installation view of *FLORIDALAND*, 2018, four-channel video. From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch* on view at MASS MoCA from March 25th, 2018 – March 17th, 2019.

Figure 6. Installation view of fencing masks, 2018, mixed media. From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch* on view at MASS MoCA from March 25th, 2018 – March 17th, 2019.

Figure 7. From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch* on view at MASS MoCA from March 25th, 2018 – March 17th, 2019.

Figure 8. *Untitled (Ouroboros)*, 2017, taxidermy alligator carcasses. From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch* on view at MASS MoCA from March 25th, 2018 – March 17th, 2019.

Figure 9. Metal Tambourines, 2016, hand-made metal tambourines. From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch* on view at MASS MoCA from March 25th, 2018 – March 17th, 2019.

Figure 10. *Seven Creatures*, 2017, foam and mixed media. From the exhibition *Fictions* on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2017-2018); from the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch* on view at MASS MoCA from March 25th, 2018 – March 17th, 2019.

Figure 11. *Yard Sign VII (Mother),* 2018, mixed media on wood panel. From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch* on view at MASS MoCA from March 25th, 2018 – March 17th, 2019.

Figure 12. *Yard Sign VI (Atomic Dog)*, 2018, mixed media on wood panel. From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch* on view at MASS MoCA from March 25th, 2018 – March 17th, 2019.

Figure 13. *No danger in the water*, 2015, C-Print. From the series *Sweet milk in the badlands*.

Figure 14. *The Hours*, 2015, C-Print, multiple sizes. From the series *Sweet milk in the badlands*.

Figure 15. *Brecencia and Pheasant* II, 2015, archival pigment print. From the series *Sweet milk in the badlands*.

Figure 16. *Scratching at the wrong side of firmament*, 2015, archival pigment print. From the series *Sweet milk in the badlands*.

Figure 17. Installation view of *FLORIDALAND*, 2018, four-channel video. From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch* on view at MASS MoCA from March 25th, 2018 – March 17th, 2019.

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